

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

August 16, 2021

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

We commend the leadership of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) as the Administration confronts ongoing supply chain disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic and appreciate your previous engagement with Maine's seafood sector. We are writing to underscore the critical need to continue to engage small-scale independent fishermen as the USDA works to restore and enhance the resilience of our food supply chains. Specifically, we ask that you work with stakeholders in Maine to fully explore opportunities for seafood products from Maine to benefit from USDA's procurement efforts.

During the pandemic, markets for some types of fresh seafood all but collapsed overnight as restaurants closed and consumers shifted to preparing meals at home. At the same time, food insecurity in Maine increased by 25% and many Mainers found themselves seeking out food assistance for the first time. While food banks and other community partners worked tirelessly to meet this increased demand, sourcing high-quality protein was particularly difficult.

In Maine and in other parts of the country, fishermen and fishing groups stepped up to meet this need while also keeping our working waterfronts working. For example, Maine Coast Fishermen's Association (MCFA), an industry-based nonprofit based in Brunswick, initiated a program to purchase fresh seafood directly from small-boat fishermen who fish for groundfish like pollock, hake, haddock, monkfish and flounder; then process it locally and donate it to food insecure communities in Maine. This Fishermen Feeding Mainers program delivered over 210,000 meals of fresh or fresh frozen seafood to over 50 community groups, schools and after-school programs across the state last year.

Despite these successful partnerships and the severe impacts of the pandemic on this sector, most small-boat family fishing businesses have so far been unable to participate in USDA procurement programs. While USDA has increased its seafood purchasing efforts in response to the pandemic and directives from Congress, the majority of these purchases have benefited other regions of the country and segments of the broader seafood industry. To date, none of USDA's COVID-related seafood purchases have been awarded to suppliers based in Maine. USDA efforts to engage these smaller producers will pay large dividends—supporting and maintaining economic activity in rural areas, and helping develop consumers' tastes for seafood that is sustainable, affordable, and harvested close to their homes.

Another industry association from Massachusetts, the Cape Cod Commercial Fishermen's Alliance, has worked to create a haddock chowder, taking a sustainable seafood and creating a market for non-uniform protein which is often undervalued. While the Cape Cod program focuses on haddock, this program could open the door to other opportunities for small-boat fishermen who land comparable sustainable species in other parts of the country, including in Maine. Already, MCFA is working on a monkfish stew which takes advantage of another plentiful, sustainable, local seafood that is undervalued in our marketplace.

We urge you to prioritize partnerships with smaller-scale members of the fishing industry and allow their products to be a more prominent part of USDA's procurement program. Specifically, we ask USDA to:

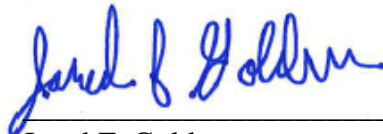
- Accelerate the deployment of seafood chowder and soup specifications within the Agricultural Marketing Service and the Food and Nutrition Service.
- Extend these specifications to include chowders and soups using sustainable seafood products from all regions of the country, including Maine; and
- Include sustainable seafood products from independent fishermen in USDA purchasing and distribution programs.

We look forward to working together to address the urgent priority of food insecurity across the country, help this critical heritage industry recover from the pandemic, and increase the resilience of our food supply chains.

Sincerely,



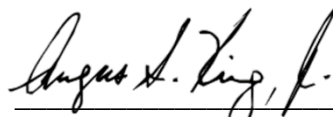
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Member of Congress



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